



PRESS RELEASE

House National Security Committee

Floyd D. Spence, Chairman

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 12, 1998

CONTACT: Maureen Cragin
Ryan Vaart
(202) 225-2539

OPENING

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN FLOYD D. SPENCE

SERVICE CHIEFS HEARING

March 12, 1998

Today the committee will hear from the four service chiefs. Gentlemen, it is an honor to have you before the committee and we welcome you. General Ryan, we want to pay a special welcome to you seeing as this is your first appearance before the committee in your capacity as Air Force Chief of Staff.

As I stated at the outset of last year's hearing with the chiefs, in many ways their responsibilities parallel ours here in Congress. We are both tasked to raise and maintain the nation's military forces. In this capacity, our witnesses know better than most the high cost being paid by dedicated men and women who are having to do more with less.

Everyday our witnesses must manage the growing quality of life, readiness and modernization problems that affect their services...the nation's military. As frustrated as most of my colleagues are with the growing resource shortfalls, truth be told, I suspect our witnesses are far more frustrated.

Late every year, in the November and December time frame, we tend to see numerous concrete examples of this frustration during the so-called PBD process. That is when many of the difficult, and often untenable, resource decisions are made and of course, occasionally leaked.

However, it was quieter than usual late last year due in large part to an inflation windfall and to the President's decision not to budget the costs of future Bosnia operations in the five year plan. For the fiscal year 1999 budget, the result was almost 5 billion dollars in unexpected funding, and probably close to 30 billion dollars in unexpected funding over the course of the five year plan.

Yet despite both this apparent “windfall,” and the President’s proposal to increase domestic spending by more than 100 billion dollars over the caps, the five year defense budget falls more than 13 billion dollars short of keeping pace with even today’s record low inflation. Were the rate of inflation to increase even modestly to levels consistent with average rates over the past 20 years, the five year budget would fall almost 100 billion dollars short of keeping pace with inflation.

I do not understand how any of us can expect the military services to stabilize their smaller QDR force structure, protect quality of life and readiness and begin to end the decade-long procurement holiday when we are dealing with budgets that are tens of billions of dollars short of keeping pace with inflation. Quality of life, readiness and modernization are all suffering and there is no end in sight to the fourteen year trend of declining defense budgets. The “robbing Peter to pay Paul” metaphor simply does not work any longer. As far as I am concerned, Peter and Paul are both getting robbed blind.

Several months ago, economist Robert Samuelson observed in the *Washington Post* that there has not been much discussion of the years of defense spending cuts because such discussion was “politically inconvenient” and because the cuts may have gone too far. Addressing the problems caused by fourteen consecutive years of decline will be “politically inconvenient” for any one who tries — civilian or military, executive or legislative branch. But, until a majority of decision-makers decide that being politically inconvenienced is a small price to pay compared to the alternative of a hollow military, the American public will remain convinced that all is well — which simply is no longer true. We have been lulled into a false sense of security.

As I indicated when Secretary Cohen testified before the committee last month, it may be that solutions to the services’ problems will not be found until the force somehow “breaks” and the American people demand that we fix it. I think we all hope and pray it will not take another Task Force Smith or Desert One to reverse the course we are presently on.

Gentleman, this committee will continue its tradition of working overtime on behalf of the men and women you command. No matter how frustrating the fight gets, this committee is not going to give up. Every member in this room wants to help. We just ask that you help us, to help you.